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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/OHI

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [LH](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON JEWISH COMMUNITY  
LEADERS

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Damian R. Leader for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Lithuania's small Jewish community, largely elderly and impoverished, lives among a homogeneous ethnic Lithuanian population, significant elements of which accept anti-Semitic stereotypes and blame the Jews for fighting alongside Soviet soldiers during World War II, Jewish leaders told Ambassador Derse during her introductory call on the community's elected chairman. The Holocaust took the lives of 95 percent of the country's Jews, the highest percentage of any country, and many Lithuanians are loath to acknowledge that their countrymen participated in massacres of Jews, the community leaders said. The Jewish community has tried for years, unsuccessfully, to regain ownership of communal property confiscated by the Nazis and Soviets, and hopes to eventually use proceeds from restitution to help restore Jewish life and culture in the country. End summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Derse visited the central Vilnius offices of the Jewish Community of Lithuania (JCL) on November 17 to pay a courtesy call on Simonas Alperavicius, the elderly elected chairman of the JCL. Also present were the JCL's two vice chairwomen, Faina Kukliansky and Masha Grodnikiene, JCL executive director Simonas Gurevicius and the chief rabbi of Lithuania, Chaim Burshtein, who lives in Lithuania only part time. Alperavicius, 81, has been chairman of the JCL for 17 years.

Anti-Semitism  
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¶3. (U) Alperavicius told the Ambassador that widespread anti-Semitism hurts the community; he cited a survey showing that 37 percent of Lithuanians harbor negative attitudes towards Jews. Also, with the 70th anniversary of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact this year, he said, Lithuanians have been comparing the Nazi and Soviet regimes and debating which was worse for Lithuania. Because some Lithuanian Jews fought alongside Soviet troops or Communist partisans against the Nazis, some Lithuanians and media outlets today claim that the Jews were complicit with the Soviets and thus not patriotic Lithuanians, said Alperavicius. He himself was born in Vilnius, fled to Russia with his family at the outbreak of the war before returning in 1944, and has lived in Lithuania ever since.

¶4. (U) "What insults me most is that we are treated as if we are Jews but not citizens of Lithuania," said Grodnikiene, JCL vice chairwoman.

¶5. (U) Gurevicius, the JCL executive director, said, "This is not anti-Israelism, but anti-Semitism based on old stereotypes. We try not to fight against anti-Semitism, but instead we try to fight for tolerance. We're trying to open the doors to the community. For us it's a challenge, but it's that much more of a challenge for this (the larger Lithuanian) community."

¶6. (U) Kukliansky, a lawyer who is also head of the Jewish Community of Vilnius, said intolerance was able to take root because almost no political, social or intellectual leaders in Lithuania were willing to speak out against it, in part because they would likely then be attacked themselves by newspapers that are extremist but also very popular.

¶7. (C) Alperavicius said to the Ambassador: "Although Lithuania became a member of the European Union, it has not become a real European country. I can tell you that. I can't say it publicly."

¶8. (U) The Ambassador asked whether the European Union has been any help in fostering tolerance or taking Lithuania to task for failing to live up to its obligations as a member state. She also said, "The United States Government cares about tolerance and diversity. President Obama has made clear how incredibly important those values are to us. I believe the issue of education for tolerance in society is very important." She promised that the Embassy would work with the Jewish community and others to promote tolerance.

#### Communal property restitution

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¶9. (U) One of the primary goals of the JCL has been to regain communal property confiscated from the Jewish community during the Nazi and Soviet occupations. "The strengthening of anti-Semitism is also related to restitution, because the television and papers talk about it as if Lithuania was giving away its property, not simply returning property that was taken from the Jews. People

don't differentiate communal property from private property." Alperavicius also said that there is no state-sponsored anti-Semitism in Lithuania, but that "there are a lot of government officials who are anti-Semitic in their views, and we feel this."

¶10. (U) Gurevicius, the JCL executive director, said the Jewish community sees restitution as a tool, not an aim. The goal is to revive Jewish culture and Jewish life in a country where 95 percent of the Jews were exterminated, he said, and the money from property restitution would help to do that.

¶11. (C) The GOL has submitted to the Seimas (parliament) a bill that would provide partial compensation of 128 million LTL (about USD 55 million) -- but not actual restitution of property -- to the Jewish community for some of its confiscated buildings. But GOL and Seimas leaders have told us that the bill will not come up for debate until after passage of the 2010 government budget, for fear that a proposal to pay millions of dollars to Jews at a time when the government is cutting pensions and other social benefits would raise anti-Semitism, have no chance of passage, hurt the budget's chances of passage and, in the words of the Justice Minister, be "political suicide."

¶12. (C) Local and international Jewish leaders who have long negotiated the restitution issue with the GOL have publicly said the bill before the Seimas is inadequate and not acceptable, but privately they say they are willing to accept it, as they believe it is their only chance to get any compensation at all.

¶13. (U) The Ambassador said that the Embassy has paid close attention to the restitution issue and would continue to follow the progress of the bill in the Seimas.

#### Snipiskes cemetery

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¶14. (U) Rabbi Burshtein thanked the Ambassador for the Embassy's assistance in getting the GOL to protect from future development the Snipiskes Cemetery, a centuries-old Jewish burial ground in central Vilnius. "People whose books are learned in every yeshiva in the world are buried here,

and that's very important to us." The Ambassador said that the Embassy has made clear to GOL officials that while declaring the cemetery protected was a positive move, it must be followed by clear steps to implement the declaration and restore the cemetery to its proper use and appearance.

#### Community growth

¶15. (U) The JCL leaders gave the Ambassador an overview of their activities: feeding and caring for destitute and elderly Jews, providing religious and language instruction, operating a Jewish school and kindergarten, publishing books and hosting conferences on a variety of topics related to Jewish culture, religion and history. Grodnikiene said, "Our largest achievement is our young generation, which will ensure continuity, that our community will continue in the future."  
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